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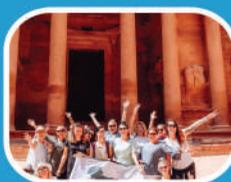
Japan



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DESTINATION JAPAN



*Backpacking and trekking
across Japan*

Article by Tamar Valkenier, The Netherlands



I had a few weeks to cover between trips in Mongolia and decided it would be a good opportunity to discover Japan. A culture so strange and foreign to me, people so small and polite and nature so wild; I was keen to go and explore. And I found the perfect way to do that! In 1974 a 1700 km long hiking trail, named the Tokai Nature Trail, was completed. It leads from the city of Tokyo to Osaka, through the mountains of 11 prefectures, though also regularly passes through little villages and towns in between.

I went to Japan in August, which is not necessarily the best time for hiking. Spring is celebrated for its cherry blossoms and fall for the autumn colours. Summer, on the other hand, is extremely hot, humid and known for typhoons, thunderstorms and nasty bugs. Together with some minor earthquakes, I experienced it all.

I landed in Tokyo. Despite housing 14 million people, the city has a surprisingly calm and quiet feel about it. Everything is very well organised, people line up

where the signs tell them to; there is no talking in the trains and no eating on the streets. Public toilets are straight out of a science-fiction movie with more buttons to push than I can possibly try out in one visit.

I took the train to Mt. Takao and walked up with quite a few other hikers all of whom politely greeted me, but after an hour or two I was on my own for the rest of my travels through the mountains. An occasional day-hiker sometimes passed me by, but none of them spoke any English and my Japanese was unfortunately still non-existent. I used the camera function of Google translate to read the signs and downloaded a gpx file into Maps.me to navigate. This app had worked well for me during my hiking in Jordan earlier this year.

The trail started with a very steep uphill climb and it quickly became clear that this was going to be my life for the coming weeks: hiking either up or down very steep slopes.

I regularly passed small shrines and

temples, where I prayed to whatever deity I believed was housed there. It was necessary, as the trail is old and many sections have eroded, washed out or the wooden support beams are now rotten. Sometimes the steps are too high to reach, leaving me slaloming around them on the slippery edges. I often had to navigate big boulders, due to vanished bridges, while climbing over fallen trees, trying to find the path. When there was a path it was often carved out of the side of steep slopes and no wider than a foot or two.

Spider webs and fallen branches littered the trail, while occasionally a landslide had taken the trail out altogether. Often I could manage only about one or two kilometres an hour. I was hiking at the edge of my physical abilities but I must admit that it was quite addictive. The

1. Enjoying the view of mountain;
2. Dinner at standup sushi bar the night before departure;
3. Buying food in typical Japanese shop;
4. Warm meetings on the trail;
5. Vending machines along the roadside.





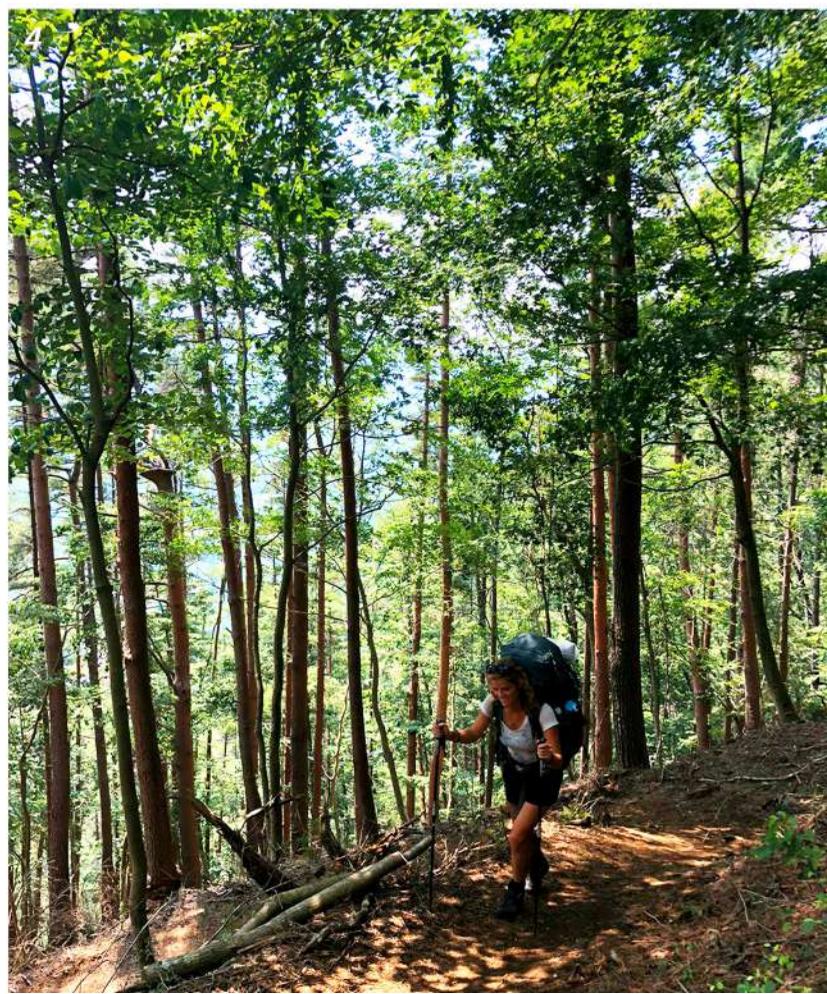
My hiking poles were my best friends to balance me up and over obstacles, as was my tiny towel to wipe the sweat away from my eyes. With temperatures well above 30 degrees Celsius and humidity up to 95% I sweated ferociously, especially while going uphill with my 21-25 kg backpack on.

more I physically exhausted myself, the clearer my mind seemed to become.

My hiking poles were my best friends to balance me up and over obstacles, as was my tiny towel to wipe the sweat away from my eyes. With temperatures well above 30 degrees Celsius and humidity up to 95% I sweated ferociously, especially while going uphill with my 21-25 kg backpack on. Water is not abundant and since I prefer sleeping on top of the mountains with spectacular views I usually carry between two and six litres of water. The heavier my pack, the more I sweat, the more water I needed to carry up: it's a vicious circle I can't escape.

Thankfully most of the trail was in the forest and therefore shaded. Once I had to walk uphill in the full sunlight for about five kilometres. I charted fast, sweated ferociously and got totally overheated. I started to feel weak, dizzy and nauseous and was getting worried as to whether I would make it up the next mountain: it took a long time to cool down.

These, predominantly pine, forests house monkeys and giant flying squirrels, unfortunately both I never saw. The mountains are beaming with wildlife though and I encountered many Sika deer, pheasants, herons, wild boars and a few Japanese serow, a goat-antelope I had never seen before. I found snakes of all sizes and colours on the trail, climbing trees or sliding between the rocks. Some were poisonous but all tended to snake away as soon as they noticed me. Butterflies were abundant, green





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caterpillars with red stripes climbed up trees, little birds walked around them and beautiful mosses grew between interesting mushrooms.

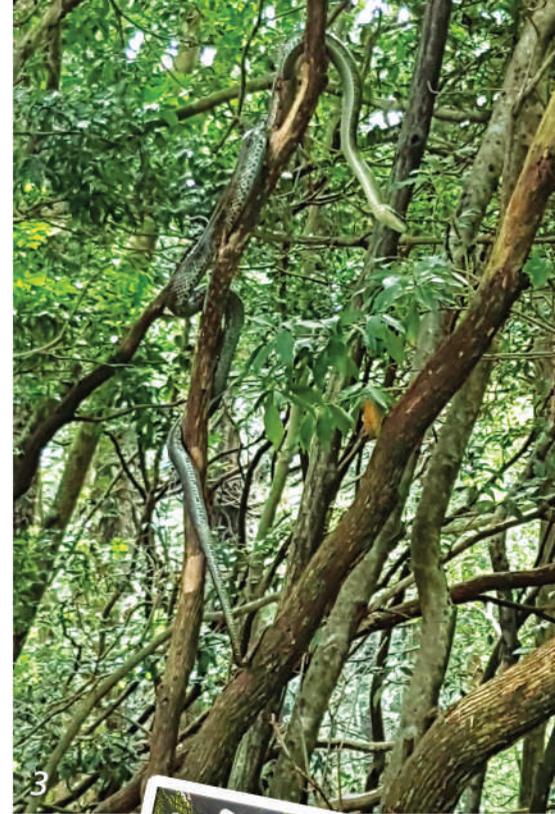
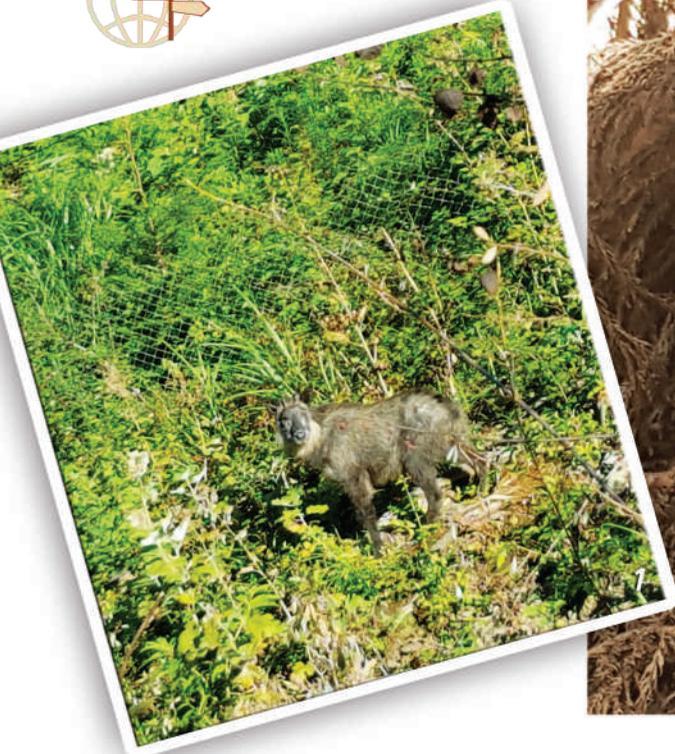
Parts of the trail are home to hundreds of leeches ready to grab onto your boots. I stopped every five meters to pull a dozen of the little bastards off my feet. Their anti-coagulant left my ankles bleeding all day. I dealt with this by reminding myself that since the time of ancient Egypt leeches have been used in medicine, so it must be healthy.

Many a sign warned me of bears in the area; about two to three people a year are killed by bears in Japan, many more are wounded. The fear interfered with my sleep on the first few nights, as the forests were so full of sound that I would sit right up in bed every time a branch

broke. I was not carrying bear spray but I was cooking well away from my campsite and hanging my food from a tree. During the day I would carry a bear bell but tended to put it away as the sound drove me crazy and also scared away the other wildlife that I actually wanted to see.

A typhoon was forecasted to hit one night. I passed by a small campsite and decided to stay there instead of camping on my own on some mountaintop that night. The campsite seemed abandoned but a 70 year old Japanese man welcomed me warmly. He asked me to pitch my tent near the river. Rivers can rise dramatically during heavy rainfall and I asked him for a better spot but

1. Overgrown paths up the hill;
2. Walking through tea plantations;
3. Wild rivers cut through the mountains along the trail;
4. Hiking poles are great on both uphill and downhill;
5. Coming across hidden forest shrines along the trail;
6. Mountain gods on the trail;
7. A mountain temple;
8. Occasional bamboo forest.



he assured me that I'll be safe. He then summoned me to the house: I was the only guest and he wanted to drink Sake (diluted with green tea) and sing karaoke with me. He set up a humongous screen and loud music was blasting through two-meters-high speakers. I sang all the three English songs in the repertoire, but it is impossible to 'win' against the master.

After dark I went to bed but the rain soon started bucketing down. Although my tent was holding up I didn't feel comfortable. At 1 am, in the pouring rain, I started moving my tent to a higher ground. Soon an alarm sounded and the river turned into a raging mud stream, flooding the entire area where I was camping just minutes ago. I was lucky to have avoided a disaster. If I hadn't moved I would surely have drowned.

Though it was another rough night, that next day started normally with climbing up 1200 meters in altitude in just a few hours. Panting, I reached one of the few refuges scattered on the mountaintops. It was a modern-looking wooden building, capable of hosting a few people for an emergency night, though I found that the last person had signed the hut book weeks ago.

The mist was getting thicker as I got

closer and right after moving in, the rain came bucketing down, this time with thunder and lightning striking just meters away from me. I ran outside to quickly construct a rainwater catchment. I would be requiring the extra drinking water as the water source was miles away and I was not going anywhere in this weather. Though it was just one full day's walk from the nearest village I felt very remote and there was something beautifully magical about spending the night all alone in a little hut that resonated with the sound of thunder all around.

The next morning I struggled to find water and hiked straight on for six hours without taking a break. I finally reached a village where I saw a man watering his garden. I asked him if I could use the hose to fill my water bottles. Probably due to the stench coming out of my body, he offered me a shower and directed me to the basement of his apartment to a communal shower area. I gratefully accepted his offer.

Feeling refreshed, I walked into the town. While buying my favourite Japanese snack, Onigiri (rice triangles), I chatted with a retired paediatrician who assured me that the rainy season was over and the rest of the month should be dry.

While the paediatrician's words were still resonating in my head, I got caught in another humongous





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thunderstorm just an hour later. On the mountain there is no place to hide and the narrow trail turned into a raging mud flow in just a matter of minutes. I took my clothes off, covered my pack and kept trekking. On open sections I ran, to minimize the risk of getting hit by lightning. For as long as I kept climbing I wasn't cold.

I finally reached a small shelter with just enough space to stay safe and dry. The storm was intense but fortunately it only lasted for about two hours. The weather slowly cleared up, a double rainbow welcomed me and finally my first view of the sacred Mt. Fuji appeared. I enjoyed the priceless view.



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I would see many different views of the mountain in the next few days, together with my friend Karan who decided to join me on the trail for the next two weeks. I have known Karan for over 15 years and was grateful to be able to share this experience with him.

The mountain is magical in many ways, including the way it seems to appear and disappear with the clouds, leaving us wondering as to how it's possible to not see the entire mountain one moment and then it is summoning above everything else the next.

The following days the weather as well as the mountains, both were a lot more gentle as we passed the five lakes surrounding Mt. Fuji. We swam and camped with a few hundred Japanese to watch one of the many impressive fireworks shows summer has to offer.

A bit hung-over, the next day we hiked a whopping 25 kilometres, passing through at least six different ecosystems. The scenery was con-

stantly changing: pine forests, bamboo forests, tea plantations, long green grass, canyons and so on. At some point Karan spotted a deer and upon closer inspection it seemed to be stuck in the fence with his antlers wrapped up in the netting. We decided to start a rescue mission. The closer we approached the more the poor deer was panting loudly, foam on the lips and wildly running back and forth, only wrapping himself up even worse. We pulled out our knives and started cutting the fence around his antlers, while trying to keep a safe distance. We finally succeeded and happily watched the deer run free.

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1. A Japanese Serow;
 2. One of the many snakes on the trail;
 3. We watched this snake climb a tree;
 4. Many signs warned us against bears but I never saw one;
 5. The result of hundreds of leeches along the trail;
 6. A welcome sight of the sun shining through the trees;
 7. Wild camping in bear country;
 8. View of the bridge that we were about to cross;
 9. Rescuing a deer stuck in the fence.



We camped at the last of the five lakes, getting up early to see an amazingly colourful sunrise over Mt. Fuji before starting our ascent up the next mountain. We couldn't easily find the path and decided to try another trail, which we did find. It led us to beautiful little shrines, graves and statues of mountain gods with Sake offerings - definitely a hidden local treasure.

The path kept going up for quite a while until it finally vanished altogether. Stranded halfway up we decided to bush bash our way to the top, which was easier said than done. Steep mountain slopes had us sliding down with every step, giving us the fear of dropping down into the abyss beneath

it. Slippery boulders and wet trees didn't give us much grip and Karan's experience in dangerous situations kept him from enjoying the challenge which I loved so much.

We sweated out a record but victoriously made it to the top. Charging back down into the valley and up another mountain, we exhausted ourselves completely and pitched camp at a little parking space with spectacular views over endless forested mountains.

Joined by a lovely Japanese couple that was there to photograph Mt. Fuji, the next morning we ate our last calorie bar, topped with our last peanut butter and drank our last coffee.

The trail was getting more worn and extremely slippery. It was rerouted but we decided to try anyways; I fell three times. We took turns waving our hiking poles in front of us for hours to clear the hundreds of spider webs on our path. Finally we reached a somewhat bigger village and there we were bathed in the warm hospitality that Japanese countryside has to offer. A lovely lady offered us some of her refreshing local green tea, refusing to accept our money. We greeted a man passing by us cycling up the mountain and later down again. When he passed a third time he stopped his bike and handed us a plastic bag with two red bean pastries in it. Without a word he took off again. Oishi! (delicious!).



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Ever since I left Tokyo I hadn't seen any cafe or restaurant and when we found a little place that sold homemade fresh food, we went for it, indulging in Japanese hotpot, dumplings and noodles. We hung out our gear to dry from the wet night before and ended up talking to a few Japanese couples. They all insisted to give us a ride up the mountain to the shrine we had planned to visit. Many questions were asked and pictures taken before we finally parted ways. They lifted our spirits up just as we were about to start the hardest climb of our entire trek.

The mountain was steep, slippery and long, challenged by leeches and spider webs, monster flies biting through our cloths and Karan's favourite - the little flies going for our eyes. We still managed to climb on in silence only to collapse from exhaustion the moment we finally reached the top.

Next we walked through many tea plantations, where we met a beautiful old lady hardly half my size. Karan believed she gave us her blessings for the trail ahead and I think it helped! What happened was as follows: we had run out of food four hours earlier and we were aiming for a restaurant we had seen on the map.

Arriving at "restaurant" "Private Time", we found a pagoda on the riverside with facilities to cook your own meal, but no restaurant attached to it. A few adolescents, chaperoned by an older man, were spear-fishing in the river. They immediately made place for us and offered us their rice curry and ice tea. We witnessed strange interactions and couldn't quite figure out the situation. When we finished doing the dishes, the older man suddenly tried to hand us some yens. We told them that we really appreciate the shared food but would not accept any money. The

1. Incredible views of endless green mountains;
2. Magnificent views of mountains from my tent;
3. Watching sunset on the Mt. Fuji from my tent;
4. Camping near pagoda and ancient Ginkgo tree;
5. Spotting a gorgeous waterfall on the route;
6. Passing by hidden treasures in the forest;
7. An old, worn out structure in the forest.





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That day, for the first time in three weeks, we passed by an actual café where we could buy an actual cup of coffee and we happily spent our, what we now called, 'blood money' there. Everybody in the cafe was so kind and both owners and customers chatted with us and took our pictures. We managed to find out from the locals here the names of the snakes we had seen.

A lady at the café, Mihoko Ikeda, showed us the actual maps of the trail. She recommended us to pass by her friend Mr. Kakidaira, further up the road, who apparently made the most delicious tea and loved to chat with foreigners. She wrote us a note and we took it up to him. He welcomed us warmly, shared his tea and stories and his wife even came out to give us her homemade pudding, which was more delicious than anything we had eaten in Japan so far.

From there we continued on to a beautiful old Gingko tree with a small pagoda and shrine where we pitched the camp.

The next day was to be our last day of hiking. We had lunch at a 100+ meters-tall waterfall where we tried to make our own Onigiris, but failed miserably and turned them into delicious sushi rolls instead. We were lucky, as it was the "Mountain Day". Since the last few years it is being celebrated as an official

public holiday dedicated to enjoying Japan's mountains. It was wonderful to be able to end almost three weeks of hiking approximately 300 kilometres on this special day.

The adventure of hiking the old trail was tough, it was wild and challenging but beautiful too. It nonetheless, it was a very interesting way to explore the nature and culture of such a unique country like Japan. It was such a privilege to be so warmly welcomed by the lovely Japanese people we met all throughout the way.

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1. A friend, Karan, joined me for two weeks on the trail;
 2. Hiking dense wet forests;
 3. The trail is minimally maintained and was non-existent at some places;
 4. The trail is challenging;
 5. Teaching survival skills to Japanese along the way;
 6. The Japanese that fed us and gave us 250 euros worth of Japanese yen.